



*Social Science in the
Public Interest*

University of Michigan

Office of the Director

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July 10, 2000

John H. Thompson
Associate Director for Decennial Census
Bureau of the Census, Building 2, Room 3586
Suitland and Silver Hill Roads
Suitland, MD 20233

Re: Comment letter regarding Secretary of Commerce's proposed rule

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I write in response to the "request for comments on the proposed rule" published in the Federal Register on June 20, 2000 by the Secretary of Commerce regarding the procedure for release of the corrected data file for Census 2000. The proposed rule delegates to the Director the authority to make the decision on release of the corrected data, after soliciting and receiving a detailed report from professionally trained statistical experts at the Bureau. My colleagues and I believe that the Secretary has acted in the best interests of "honest and reliable" data, and in the best interests of the nation, in placing the determination of what data are "correct" in the hands of professional statisticians and professionally trained civil servants at the Bureau.

I travel abroad extensively, including within nations seeking to build the civil institutions and practices that will strengthen their democracies. One of the points often arising from conversations with community leaders in central Europe, Latin America, southern Africa, and southeast Asia is that the spread of democracy is linked to the availability of good data, reliable information, and the analytical capability--among as many persons as possible--of knowing which data are trustworthy. It is pointed out that so often the history of pre-democratic regimes, governments in power collected and promulgated data to suit the regimes' political purposes. What these new democracies seek, is honest numbers for democracy--data collected by professional standards and analyzed and promulgated outside the reach of crass partisan motivation. These conversations are insightful, for within our own 20th century history, we in the U.S. have sought to construct and refine a federal statistical system and a set of professionally guided civil servants bound to produce such honest numbers for our democracy. But as our own history also shows, even a well designed and professionalized system can become

distorted by political intrusion if we are not constantly vigilant in separating--insofar as possible--the political from the scientific/statistical.

The proposed procedure for delegating the decision on the release of corrected data for Census 2000 to the Director of the Bureau of the Census, upon recommendations of professional statistical staff, is in the spirit of such a separation of the political from the scientific. The Director of the Bureau has clarified (in his Statement on the Feasibility of Using Statistical Methods to Improve the Accuracy of Census 2000) criteria that must be satisfied in determining if the corrected data most accurately count the U.S. population. Using these criteria, statistical experts at the Bureau can issue honest numbers that are essential to the Bureau's integrity and to reasoned democratic decision-making.

On behalf of the Institute for Social Research, which serves as a university-based national laboratory for the production and analysis of social data for the U.S., including data collected by the Bureau, I write to support the Secretary of Commerce's proposed rule. (I attach a separate sheet for the names of co-signers of this letter of support.)

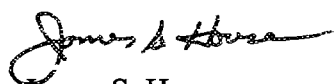
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David L. Featherman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

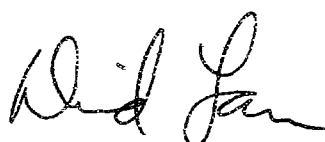
David L. Featherman, Director and
Professor of Sociology and Psychology

Attachment

xc: The Honorable Dan Miller



James S. House
Director, Survey Research Center



David Lam
Director, Population Studies



Eleanor Singer
Senior Research Scientist